



The Biggest Mitzvah in the World?

By: Noam Gershov | Features | November 3, 2019

In typical fashion, the biannual Yeshiva University Club Fair attracted hordes of excited students. Ready to conquer the world and sign up for an impossible number of commitments, the students walked about the auditorium, perusing the posters and conversing with the club representatives. As someone interested in medicine, one particular club piqued my curiosity: the Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS). Behind its stand stood Moshe Nissanoff (YC '21). Nissanoff agreed to sit down with me and explain the purpose and importance of the HODS organization.

Founded in 2001 by Robby Berman, the expressed mission of HODS is to “raise awareness about the halakhic permissibility of posthumously donating organs to save lives.” HODS aims to educate and inform the Jewish world about the views of various Orthodox Rabbis concerning organ donation. According to Nissanoff, an organization like HODS would not need to exist if the matter were straightforward. The fact that it does exist implies that a number of challenges are present. Nissanoff explained that the qualms can be broken down into three general categories.

The first challenge relates to superstitious beliefs. There is a religious concept referred to in Hebrew as “Al tiftach peh l'Satan,” or “Do not open your mouth [and tempt] the Satan.” Many people believe, for example, that a healthy person should not sit in a wheelchair or play with crutches, as these actions can “tempt” the Satan to actually cripple the person. Similarly, some argue that becoming a member of HODS urges the Satan to make use of these organs by damaging them. Nissanoff stated that, contrary to this belief, thousands of HODS card-holders are — thank God — healthy. Additionally, people have not shown such superstitious reservations when it comes to purchasing insurance, which — if using the aforementioned logic — would tempt Satan to destroy the insurance holder’s house or car.

A second challenge some pose is regarding the fundamental belief of t'chiyas hameisim, or the resurrection of the dead. Most Orthodox Jews believe that with the coming of mashiach, all who have died will be brought back to life. Some argue that t'chiyas hameisim can only occur if one has been buried with all of his or her organs. However, all organs eventually decay and disappear after burial, proving that the retention of organs post-mortem is not necessary for t'chiyas hameisim.

The third and most significant challenge to organ donation relates to the debate on the threshold of death. Death is either determined as the irreversible cessation of the functions of the brain, colloquially known as brain death, or the irreversible cessation of the heart, known as lethal heart failure. Both are completely irreversible, and both forms of death are considered to be halakhic death by revered Torah scholars. To name a few in each category, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, and Rabbi Hershel Schachter believe that irreversible heart failure is halakhic death, while Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, and Rabbi Moshe Tendler believe that irreversible brain death is halakhic death. According to hods.org, 85.23% of the 341 Orthodox rabbis from across the globe who carry HODS Organ Donor cards define brain-death as halakhic death.

Nissanoff emphasized that the belief that the halakhic threshold of death is defined as brain-death is very important since “organ donation has a much greater success rate when extracted from a person with brain-death, whereas heart failure causes the organs to rapidly deteriorate.” HODS hopes to educate about both forms of death and encourages people to consult their local Orthodox Rabbis.

Nissanoff related that he became involved in the organization upon seeing an advertisement on the YU Marketplace Facebook page asking for people to represent this not-for-profit cause. The post immediately resonated with Moshe, whose grandfather underwent a heart transplant in 2008. He received a healthy heart from an unfortunate 20-year-old who suffered from brain death after a motorcycle accident. Thanks to the surgery and with the help of God, Moshe's grandfather fully recovered.

As president of HODS, Nissanoff plans to educate students about organ donation, run fundraising events, and hopefully convince more people to become donors themselves. In fact, HODS is running a 5K race for fundraising on Nov. 17. By bringing this organization one step closer to the student body of Yeshiva University, Nissanoff is confident that others will also take advantage of this huge mitzvah and realize that “saving one life is like saving the whole world.”

Photo Caption: The YU Halakhic Organ Donor Society (HODS) club logo.

Photo Credit: Moshe Nissanoff

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